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SUBJECT: ACTING CENTCOM COMMANDER GENERAL DEMPSEY MEETS
UZBEKISTAN OFFICIALS ON AUGUST 28

REF: TASHKENT 948

Classified By: Political Officer Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: During a visit to Tashkent on August 28, Acting CENTCOM Commander General Martin Dempsey met separately with First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilkhom Nematov and Director of the National Drug Control Center Kamol Dusmetov. He also conducted mil-to-mil meetings with Minister of Defense Ruslam Mirzayev, Chief of Defense General-Major Victor Makhmudov, and Deputy Minister of Defense Rustam Niyazov. All interlocutors praised U.S. assistance in response to the munitions depot explosions in Kagan and called for more cooperation in border security, counter-terrorism, and counter-narcotics issues. However, Dusmetov indicated that the full-fledged return of DEA Agents would be a matter for future consideration. General Dempsey expressed concern about two political prisoners, Sanjar Umarov and Erkin Musaev, but Nematov said these men were convicted of "concrete economic crimes" and added that such inquiries were construed as meddling in Uzbekistan's internal affairs. Nematov reiterated Uzbekistan's blunt criticism of the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and pitched Karimov's proposed 6 plus 3 UN Contact Group; this was the first time an Uzbek official offered "to study the idea of incorporating Afghanistan" into the idea. Nematov also asked many pointed questions about the situation in Pakistan.

12. (C) Earlier in the day, Mirzayev laid out for the first time Uzbekistan's position on the Russia-Georgia conflict. He criticized Georgian President Saakashvili for the attack on South Ossetia but stopped short of recognizing the breakaway territories, instead calling for adherence to the six-point plan. In a private comment to the Ambassador, however, Mirzayev said that Russia provoked Saakashvili into

taking action. Uzbekistan will be under enormous pressure to recognize the states during Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit on September 1-2 during Uzbekistan's independence holiday weekend. The best strategy is to maintain channels of engagement and avoid trying to back the Uzbeks into a corner. General Dempsey's visit was well-timed, and we believe additional high-level visitors could offer the Government of Uzbekistan a refreshing counter-balance that could further enhance bilateral ties. End summary.

Mutual Interest

13. (C) Acting CENTCOM Commander General Dempsey met with Nematov during his visit to Tashkent on August 28. (Note: Foreign Minister Norov was in Dushanbe at the SCO Summit. End note.) Nematov was frank and cordial, and he stressed "a mutual need to develop ties," particularly in the areas of counter-terrorism, border security, and counter-narcotics. He also noted that Uzbekistan has "pragmatic views...not just in its relations with the U.S. but with other neighbors." (Comment: This seemed to be a reference to the delicate position Uzbekistan finds itself in as a result of the situation in the Caucasus, and a reminder to the U.S. that Uzbekistan is under a lot of pressure. End comment.) Nematov said the string of official U.S. visitors this year and the Ambassador's meetings with President Karimov are signs of increasing bilateral cooperation. He also expressed Uzbekistan's appreciation for assistance responding to the

Kagan disaster.

14. (C) General Dempsey noted that there are far more reasons to improve ties now than there were in 2001, and we face many mutual threats. He also emphasized the U.S. Government interest in pursuing a broad relationship, focusing not only on security issues but economic development and human rights concerns as well. He assured Nematov that the U.S. understands the position Uzbekistan is in vis-a-vis its neighbors but said it could count on CENTCOM as being a consistent, predictable partner.

Afghanistan: "Afghans Need Food, Not Democracy"

15. (C) Nematov repeated Uzbekistan's oft-repeated blunt criticism of the Afghan Government, particularly the Karzai administration, as well as NATO's efforts. He said "the situation in our region depends on the situation in Afghanistan," and added that it "is worsening and we are not optimistic." He drew the link with the situation in Pakistan but attributed the problems in part to President Karzai's "absence of authority" and claimed "he only controls half of Kabul." Nematov emphasized Uzbekistan's position that there needs to be a "demilitarization" of Afghanistan since too many people have weapons. He also accused the West of being naive about democracy and putting too much stock in parliamentary elections. "Afghans need food, not democracy" Nematov opined. He also called for more economic development projects and education, and said "they do not know anything about agriculture except growing drugs."

16. (C) Nematov then shifted gears to offer a fresh pitch for Uzbekistan's 6 plus 3 proposal that Karimov first circulated at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April. He acknowledged that the Afghanistan situation cannot be addressed without NATO, and said the UN Contact Group would allow key actors to better understand the situation. Nematov then offered "to study the idea of including Afghanistan" into the proposal, the first time an Uzbek official expressed a willingness to do so.

17. (C) General Dempsey acknowledged that the complex situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated but emphasized that the U.S. would likely be increasing resources by spring 2009. He added that the Afghan people are adamantly opposed to a return of the Taliban and assured Nematov that the situation

will never be as bad as it was during the Taliban's repressive regime. Nematov said he was pleased to hear the U.S. remains committed to Afghanistan and agreed "the people do not want the Taliban to return and neither do we."

On Pakistan

¶18. (C) Nematov asked many pointed questions about Pakistan, which he said is a major concern for Uzbekistan because of its impact on the security of neighboring Afghanistan. He was particularly interested in whether the Pakistan army will continue to support Musharraf and the status of possible U.S. plans to attack terrorist training camps on Pakistani soil.

Human Rights Cases

¶19. (C) General Dempsey acknowledged some of the steps forward on human rights issues Uzbekistan has made in the past year, which Nematov appreciated. General Dempsey did also express the U.S. Government interest in the plight of two political prisoners with serious medical problems -- Sunshine Coalition leader Sanjar Umarov and former Ministry of Defense official and Embassy contact Erkin Musaev. General Dempsey respectfully requested reconsideration of their incarceration on medical grounds; however, Nematov responded negatively, noting that both of these men were "convicted of concrete economic crimes" and that such inquiries could be construed as "meddling into the internal affairs of Uzbekistan."

¶110. (C) Nematov did note that occasionally the Parliament approves amnesties for certain individuals on the occasion of holidays, and the MFA released a press statement on August 29 confirming that there will be an amnesty in conjunction with the Independence Day holiday on September 1. (Comment: We have not received any indication that either of these two individuals or any other political prisoners whose cases we monitor will be among those released, but we will monitor this closely. There is increasing concern about Umarov in recent days because the government has apparently transferred him to another location and is refusing to provide information about his whereabouts to family members. End comment.)

Termez Air Base

¶111. (C) General Dempsey thanked the Uzbeks for their January decision to allow U.S. civilian officials assigned to NATO to transit the Termez Air Base en route to Afghanistan on a case-by-case basis. He noted that there are also U.S. military personnel assigned to NATO who cannot accompany their units if they transit the Termez Air Base en route to Afghanistan, and he requested that the Uzbeks consider granting a blanket clearance for such U.S. personnel assigned to NATO. Nematov responded that a NATO delegation met recently with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss such issues but no decision has yet been reached.

Counter-narcotics Issues

¶112. (C) In a separate meeting Kamol Dusmetov, who is the top counter-narcotics official in Uzbekistan, thanked the U.S. for its major assistance in training, equipment, and infrastructure over the years. He noted that there "is an intensification" of drugs being smuggled into Uzbekistan via the Amu Darya River, which forms the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Traffickers, he explained, are getting bolder and are devising creative new methods of hiding and transporting larger quantities of drug shipments (for instance, using the gas tanks of vehicles to conceal drugs). Previously, Uzbek authorities reported that smugglers tended to avoid the direct, heavily-guarded border in favor of remote terrain in Tajikistan and then to

Uzbekistan. He cited two recent heroin seizures in excess of 500 kilograms in Uzbekistan and also cited a 1.6 ton seizure of heroin precursor chemicals as part of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Operation Tarcet (ref).

¶13. (C) General Dempsey stated that it is now clear that

money from the illicit narcotics trade gets back to terrorists and the Taliban, which amounted to at least USD one billion last year alone. Therefore, counter-narcotics is a security issue for all parties and the U.S. encourages more regional efforts in Central Asia to reduce the flow of drugs and precursors in both directions, General Dempsey noted. He followed up on the U.S. proposal -- proffered after consulting with receptive Uzbek officials -- to reestablish an office of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Tashkent. (Comment: Despite the stated desires by law enforcement officers to resume cooperation, the Embassy received a disappointingly negative diplomatic note on July 22 rejecting the re-establishment of a DEA office, which we believe is due to high-level reluctance in the National Security Service. End comment.) Dusmetov praised the previous work of DEA and privately has told emboffs that he wants to see the return of accredited DEA Agents, but he carefully toed the current official line. He told General Dempsey that "we have enough productive cooperation ongoing in this sphere at present" but that "this issue will remain open for consideration in the near future." He added as an afterthought that there were "political reasons for closing this office."

Russia-Georgia

¶14. (C) At a luncheon earlier in the day, Minister of Defense Mirzayev told General Dempsey that, in anticipation of a question on Uzbekistan's position regarding Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he had prepared a briefing memo. He proceeded to read from the memo, which laid out Uzbekistan's stance as follows:

--The issues in Georgia are part of the legacy of the ethnic-territorial disputes left over from the Soviet era.

--The USSR -- and in particular the Communist Party leadership -- were in denial about the effects of ethnic disputes; they simply acted as if there were no such thing.

--When the USSR broke up, these disputes rapidly surfaced; everyone remembered past abuses, nationalistic and chauvinism sentiments burst forth and were manipulated by some unscrupulous political leaders.

--The "Communist Party of the Soviet Union" supported some groups against others in an effort to prevent and then manage the break-up of the USSR, but Moscow was unable to succeed in holding the Soviet Union together.

--Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia sought to maintain tensions with and between the newly sovereign countries of the former Soviet Union.

--In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, conflict erupted in 1991-1993, resulting in much civilian suffering. The CIS sought to negotiate a solution, and peacekeepers were deployed from Russia and Georgia with UN support.

--The status quo lasted for more than 15 years but began to erode in the past few years.

--Georgia did not pursue a peaceful approach to the situation in South Ossetia, despite appeals from Tskhinvali.

Saakashvili claimed he wanted peace but he did not act accordingly. Subsequently, Georgia launched a "blitzkrieg" on Tskhinvali, using heavy artillery and aviation, destroying much of the city and 10 neighboring villages with thousands of civilian casualties, all of them citizens of Georgia.

Saakashvili acted in the belief that there would be no repercussions.

--The Georgian government,s decision should be reviewed by an independent commission.

--All sides need to observe the six-point ceasefire plan negotiated by France on behalf of the EU.

--Russia was left with a stark choice as a result of Georgia,s actions: (1) Do nothing, despite the deaths of Russian soldiers and civilians, and risk losing influence in the region, or (2) use military force and its peacekeeping mandate to intervene. It chose the latter, unsurprisingly.

--This conflict, like all the other frozen conflicts in the former USSR, can only be resolved peacefully.

--Uzbekistan "is not taking sides" with Russia or Georgia. "We are far off" from these events, though we are interested.

¶15. (C) Mirzayev privately told the Ambassador, on the margins of an official lunch in General Dempsey,s honor, that the Russians had continued to play a dirty game behind the scenes in the Caucasus, leaving Saakashvili with little choice but to respond. (Comment: The Uzbeks are clearly trying to stay right down the middle on this issue, while conscious of Russian pressure to get them to recognize South Ossetia. That pressure will only intensify with the anticipated September 1-2 visit to Tashkent of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at the head of an economic delegation. End comment.)

Menacing Behavior from Putin's Advance Team

¶16. (C) Russian Prime Minister Putin's advance team has arrived at Tashkent's Intercontinental Hotel, and early in the morning on August 29 several drunken Russians harrassed U.S. Embassy staff involved with General Dempsey's visit. This occurred multiple times over a period of several hours. In one instance, a big Russian man approached our Air Attache, and upon learning that he was a member of the U.S. military, repeatedly demanded, "Why are American troops on Russian territory?!" until other members of the advance team pulled him away. It appeared the Russians wanted to provoke a verbal argument that could have escalated.

Georgian Embassy Comments on Uzbekistan, Russia

¶17. (C) The Georgian Charge d'Affaires told our Acting Deputy Chief of Mission on August 27 that the Uzbeks will not respond to his requests for Tashkent's commentary on South Ossetia and Abkhazia with anything other than variations of "we're studying the situation." He believed nothing will be forthcoming until after Putin's visit here. He knows the Russians have far more leverage with the Uzbeks than the Georgians do, and said he wished he could find a reason to be hopeful that Uzbekistan could at least remain neutral.

Comment:

¶18. (C) By coincidence, the timing of General Dempsey's visit just prior to Putin's arrival in Tashkent provides a useful counterweight that highlights improving U.S.-Uzbek relations. The Uzbeks are keeping careful track of high-level official American visitors, as they recited during the official meetings, and General Dempsey's visit will add to the momentum. This may gradually help us advance strategic goals with regard to Afghanistan, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and human rights.

¶19. (C) From the Uzbek perspective the visit was likely particularly welcome in advance of what will certainly be a forceful Russian effort --led by Putin himself -- to elicit

support for its independence declarations for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russians have a lot of leverage over the Uzbeks, particularly due to the importance of remittances, from migrant workers in Russia, that keep the Uzbek economy afloat. The Uzbeks are most comfortable playing the superpowers against each other and they are clearly uneasy about having to choose sides. The best strategy is to keep our channels of engagement open and continue scheduling visits by high-level officials, which will assure the Uzbeks that we are not trying to back them into a corner and can accept a pragmatic balancing act as long as it meets our interests.

120. (U) This telegram was cleared by Acting CENTCOM Commander General Martin Dempsey.

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